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Donald Morris / an analysis

Disgust, despair, chiefs decimate CIA



Going on three years after Frank Church butchered the intelligence community in his pursuit of a presidential nomination, the community is still in deep trouble, is making progress under present leadership and may not be able to shake that leadership for another year and a half.

The lurid hearings Church presided over with such relish were greeted with delight by a large element of the populace. They corrected no abuses the community itself had not discovered and rectified years earlier, but the results for the country were catastrophic.

For openers, Church had created a public climate which made it all but impossible for any reconstruction to occur. (Magazines like the Saturday Review run idiotic articles about "spooks" stumbling around in Washington restaurants, by writers described as "specializing in national security issues" — who apparently don't know the difference between the FBI and the CIA, or the KGB and the GRU.)

An articulate, sizable segment of the public is firmly convinced the intelligence community is staffed with crackpots and looneys, playing silly and dangerous games, and the whole scene should be abolished.

America cannot survive without several forms of intelligence, which consists of raw information that has been collected, processed and disseminated. Two broad forms are at issue.

The first stems from technical surveillance — photography from satellites and aircraft, and electronic recordings. This is almost entirely in military hands, and has been well handled. The problem here is a bottleneck: collection programs run far, far ahead of our capacity to process the take.

The second form is Foreign Positive Intelligence — FPI — which stems from human resources; in a word, agents. The major function of the CIA is to identify agents with access to the relevant information, recruit them, manage the cases, collect the take and send it home. There, it must be processed by trained analysts free from political pressures, who turn out objective reports. Intelligence passing through such a professional cycle is never "wrong" — but it is, at the same time, never complete.

To operate this cycle takes a large organization of operational personnel, the people who manage them, and — a separate specialty — analysts. It takes years to train these cadres. The pipeline is a long one, and, no more than in any profession, can a staff simply be hired off the street.

The CIA has had five directors in the last seven years. There have been four in the last six years, of whom only one — William Colby — was a professional, and his tenure was almost entirely devoted making sure the ship sank on an even keel and did not simply capsize during the slaughter. Colby had been preceded by James Schlesinger, who struck panic through all ranks by his quixotic and brutal attacks on the Old Guard. (This was no simple change of leadership and clearing of deadwood; scores of irreplaceable officers were sent packing.)

While Colby and George Bush managed personnel problems with consideration, their tenures coincided with the period the community was being shredded, and the drain continued. President Carter (after a fortunately abortive effort to name Ted Sorensen) put in Adm. Stansfield Turner, and the drain has accelerated.

Turner is a proven military administrator, but the CIA is not a military organization and its product is not the same as the military's technical surveillance product. Turner imported a naval staff and runs a taut ship — where firings, forced retirements and retirements and resignations stemming from disgust, despair and frustration have decimated the crew.

The operational leadership left long ago, followed by most of the second generation. Turner has also tampered with the product — shading both what is collected and what is processed and disseminated to conform with White House political considerations. This is an abuse that was unknown in the last quarter century — and the brain drain has now eroded the analytical elements as well.

Turner resembles the leadership of a medical center, with the books in apple-pie order, from which all medical personnel have fled. The wards are staffed with interns, and very little medicine is practiced in the wards.

The relationship between the intelligence community and the legislative branch is not functioning; security is so bad no foreigner will cooperate, the value of our FPI product is at an all-time low and no relief is in sight.

Carter has reportedly lost confidence in Turner, but naturally has a politician's dislike of admitting poor judgment (witness Bert Lance.) This means Turner most likely will remain until the next Inauguration Day — when Carter can conveniently (and anyone else most certainly will) dump him.

But that's a year and a half away.

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